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Introduction

In this paper, we argue that the retailers' contribution to the extensive change of the British High Streets and Town Centres since the great recession of 2008 led to examples of reinvention and the emergence of places that are inclusive and meaningful for all the stakeholders. High-Streets have a long history of being on the focus of the scholarly research and policy-making history (Dawson, 1988) as they are an arena of change and development with social, economic, political, technological, legal and environmental implications. The recession of 2008 has caused numerous troubles to the high streets and town centres, particularly the ones of small market towns. In the early 2010's the future of the high-streets re-emerged as a political priority for the British Government, for example as Mary Portas (2011, p.2) introduces her review of the British HS she notes that she "was *asked by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister to conduct an independent review into the state of our high streets*", as well as a priority for the research councils. As a result of the prioritisation of the scholarly research of future of the HS the Institute of Place Management of the Manchester Metropolitan University has been awarded a research grant by the ESRC who was concerned about the impact changes to retailing in the UK were having on town and city centres. The project evolved alongside with ten British towns, namely Alsager, Altrincham, Ballymena, Barnsley, Bristol (Church Road, St George), Congleton, Holmfirth, Market Rasen, Morley, and Wrexham (for more details visit http://www.placemanagement.org/special-interest-groups/managing-places/town-and-city-centresdowntowns/town-centre-policy-and-research/hsuk2020).

This paper elaborates on some of the evidence that were collected and reported through this project, aiming particularly to the practitioners and policy makers but also to the academic world too. The paper has a twofold aim: a. to critically examine the retail change literature and propose a framework of reinvention suitable for the market towns; and b. to explore the reinvention of the high-streets and town centres of small towns amidst the changes that have happened to their competitive environment since the start of the 2007 recession. The paper will start with a review of the literature on the concept of the retail change followed by a review of the literature on the evolution of the High Streets and Town Centres as it is driven by the market forces. The literature review will be followed by a section where the environment of the High Streets and Town Centres will be critically discussed followed by a brief section on the methodology employed for this research project. The paper will then report findings from the HS2020 project, particularly views of stakeholders involved to the vitality and the viability of the High Streets and Town Centres. Finally, conclusions will be drawn and policy making implications will be discussed, in addition to and some directions for future research that will be presented.

Retail change

The theorisation of the retail change is a rather generous term for what has been described as little more than inductively derived generalisation (Brown, 1987). Having said that, there have been a number of different attempts to retrospectively explain the changes that happed in the retail landscape. Pioch and Schmidt (2000) suggests that the debate on the retail change has concentrated variably on retail institutional development, the patterns of expansion of particular retail formats and companies, or on historical studies of selected regions, often including culture and changing forms of demand as variables influencing retail structures. They also add that most share a positivist preoccupation with reductionist representations of complex change process which aim to predict future developments and provide explanations of outcomes in all situations, regardless of broader or different context. Retail change theories have been subjected to criticism. Early studies that have been submitted before the eighties are characterised as "*descriptive reasonings*" that fail to meet the criteria for formal theory, suffer from poorly defined concepts and causal linkages, lack validity, are tautological in their reasoning and, consequently, cannot hope to serve as the foundations for retail theory (Brown, 1987, p.27). Hollander, who developed the wheel of retailing theory, argued that the models are mostly descriptive rather than exploratory, lack predictive power, suffer from the subjectivity of the selected examples and are full of "ill-defined" concepts –like newness or merchandise mix or vulnerability (Hollander 1980). Studies that have been submitted the last twenty years are characterised by realism, quantification and managerial relevance (Brown, 1987). The criticism on retail change theories have moved to a different level the last decade. The validity of cyclical theories was later questioned and a post-modern approach was proposed as an alternative in the critical process. Brown (1995) concludes that cyclical theories can't be rejected but are not panacea too. Moreover, adds that researching retail change from a post-modern epistemological stance can bring to focus the fragmented and inconsistent sequence of phenomena that motivate or characterise change.

Dawson (2000) suggests that retail evolution is not actually a revolution. He indicates that many of the features of European retailing at last century's end reflect the evolution of the sector over the fifty years or more. He also suggested that the "bigness" of the existing retail organizations, the branding policy, the over-supply of retail floor-space, the turbulence in the retail environment, the externalization or internationalization of functions, and e-retail are going to be critical issues for the retail evolution. Brown (1987) on his critique of retail change theories underlines that there are a number of terms, widely used in the conceptualization of these theories that need to be clarified. The definitions of store formats vary from country to country and usually from sector to sector, most of the research is concentrated upon American experiences, and finally theories are not tested in a range of social and economic settings. Most importantly there is a big confusion on the institutional-individual motivation and participation on the retail change process that needs to be researched. However, it is quite questionable that conceptual frameworks that are featured in the retail change research are created in a positivistic and deterministic fashion while they are representing a subjective and constructed sense making of their editors. Elms et al. (2010) maintained that the retail change emerging dilemmas have certain commonalities over the years. For example, they refer to a research project by Milner and Wheatcroft (1980) that looks at the power of the retail multiples competition as a force to initiate change which is even now a current topic in the retail evolution agenda.

One of the criticisms of the retail change theories is that they can merely be called as such (Brown, 1987). Therefore, more sophisticated methods of scrutiny shall be employed that will also encapsulate the call for multidisciplinarity in the place management research (Coca-Stefaniak et al., 2010; Wrigley and Dolega, 2011). To that end, is positioned the use of *adaptive resilience* as an explanatory framework to the evolution of places. The adaptive resilience "*focuses on anticipatory or reactive reorganisation of the form and function of a system so as to minimize the impact of a destabilising shock*" (Wrigley and Dolega, 2011, p. 2346). The destabilisation and reorganisation of the system are properties that are met in the retail change theories as well, and namely the conflict theory (Fernie et al., 2015). The difference is of course, that the retail conflict theory examines change from the organisational point of view however as Brown (1987) maintained some work geographers in the late '70s attempted to link retail spatial evolution to the various types of the environmental crises (Dawson, 2014). The application of complexity theory principles and particularly the concept the adaptive resilience was introduced by Martin and Sunley (2007) as an effort to explain how places self-organise themselves, among other anthropomorphic attributes they exhibit, as response to the changes of their surrounding conditions. Robinson (2010, p. 14) defined adaptive resilience as:

"[…] the capacity to remain productive and true to core purpose and identity whilst absorbing disturbance and adapting with integrity in response to changing circumstances."

Adaptive resilience can explain how different HSs and town centres respond to the challenges that are posed against them and come from different regions across the world. Martin (2012) presented historical findings from the performance of the UK high streets after various periods of recessions and he showed that different regions recovered in completely different pace than other. Similar studies have been conducted in Portugal (Cachinho, 2014), in the USA (Cowell, 2014), Austria, Slovakia and Slovenia (Teller et al., 2016) and other places in various cycles of their economic state. All these studies converge to the conclusion that different places adapt to their environment in a pace that depends on social, economic, and physical characteristics (Dolega and Celińska-Janowicz, 2015).

The current challenges of the high-streets are closely associated with the performance of the retail, and other, institutions that inhibit them. Portas (2011) set as the first priority of her report the appointment of a visionary town-team that will deal with the strategic and operational issues that emerge locally. Grimsey et al. (2013) referred to the necessity HS retail space to become more accessible and cheaper, particularly to the local traders. The findings of the HS2020 project highlight that priority shall be given to the development of HSs that will be attractive and open for their catchment when they need them. With that in mind, a major challenge for the HSs is to make sure that they will provide access and variety of goods sold in any given space. Schuetz et al. (2012) stressed that the retail offering that appears in a place relates to and reflects the socio-economic background of the local population. This means that a poor retail offering is likely associated with a catchment of low income but the even more importantly and concerning observation is this well may lead to a spiral of unwanted degrowth. This change makes the need of robust management of the HSs even more important. And, it shall be stressed that the management of town-centres and HSs has evolved and become more professional and scientific since the 1980's. Coca-Stefaniak and Carroll (2015) have described this evolution as a process that started as a primarily operational exercise but it has gradually changed to more managerial finally becoming in the 2010's strategic. It can be argued that this shift coincides with the development, empowerment and maturity of the Business Improvement Districts (BID) in the UK that came as a response to changes that happened in the way the public sector operated and some decline of the available funding for investment and also pressure from stakeholder groups including policy-makers, planners and the society (De Magalhães, 2012). The success of the retailers is of paramount importance for the BIDs as they can only continue existing if they win the vote, of primarily the local retailers, that takes place every five years. Therefore, change is driven by the strategic decisions that are made by the BID CEOs and managers, and in some cases it is argued that change is facilitated by the BIDs considering the success of the retailers rather than the satisfaction of the consumers (Theodoridis and Kayas, 2017).

Retail change driven by the consumers

Fernie (1997) argued that change is a consumer-driven process. His approach focuses on the demographic changes that happened since the mid-1970's in the British society. These changes brought respective changes in consumer behaviour that caused change in the retail sector. Scholars have already proposed models that include consumers as part of them (Deiderick & Dodge, 1987; Sampson & Tiggert, 1994). Deiderick and Dodge's (1987) model suggests that geographical expansion, pricing and merchandising are in relation to consumers behaviour. The impact of consumers' behaviour to the changes of the high-streets is prevalent in the research of Hart and her colleagues (see for example Hart et al., 2013 and Stocchi et al., 2016). They suggested that consumers, or the catchment of the High Streets and Town Centres, are after a holistic experience that include tangible and intangible cues that include among others the store and the product mix, the social events that can create excitement and novelty, but also functional features as ease of movement and ease of parking (Stocchi et al., 2016). These findings are in line with the findings of the HS2020 project and the reported 25 priorities for the vitality and viability of the high-streets (Parker et al., 2016). The impact of consumers to the change of the high-street is also reported by Wrigley et al. (2015), who identified consumer groups among the stakeholders that influence the evolving high-street configuration. The importance of understanding the changing perceptions of the catchment on the image of the HS is stressed by Hart et al. (2013) who maintained that understanding the perceptions and expectations of the catchment will drive the delivery of an attractive place. They also suggested that the understanding of what is delivered in the

High Streets and Town Centres is the result of a process that ends up to the reduction of the complex offering to anchors that can be recalled and easily classified in their memory.

Of course, catchment is also involved to and associated with the change that happens to the HSs due to the economic downturn. Hampson & McGoldrick (2013) identified four emerging consumer clusters in the retail sector during the recession. Namely, these are the: a. Maximum adaptors, b. Minimum changers, c. Caring thrifties, and d. Eco-crunchers (*ibid, p.835).* The minimum changers, these consumers that do not present signs of significantly changing consumer behaviour are the smallest of the four clusters, representing about 13% of the consumer base. These leaves an 87% of consumers within clusters that have shown significantly changing consumer behaviours. A point that is raised in the literature is the long-lasting impact of the recessionary consumer behaviour even after the ease of the recession period. Slaughter and Grigore (2015) maintain that the post-recession lives and lifestyles are different to the pre-recession ones however even more frugal consumers still find enjoyment from their current lives. An emerging trend during the recession period was the increase of the de-ownership and the collaborative consumption (Lindblom and Lindblom, 2017). De-ownership and collaborative consumption make the inhibiting space an even for crucial factors for the engagement of catchment with the retail activity that takes place there. This can also explain the documented net increase of the retail businesses in the High Streets and Town Centres that provide space for co-consumption, for example coffee and tea shops and restaurants and bars (LDC, 2017).

The changing nature of the expected functions of the High Streets and Town Centres from the catchment has as a result the need for their reorientation (Martin, 2012). Martin (2012) suggests that the reorientation, or realignment, is a proportionate response relevant to the crisis pressure that is imposed to the High Streets and Town Centres. Hughes and Jackson (2015) pointed that high-streets become obsolete because of a combination of economic, environmental, and functional factors. They suggested that the economic obsolescence is a result of the declining demand of retail products and services that subsequently leads to the rationalisation of retail businesses that leads to the decline on the demand of the retail property. They also raised the issue of the environmental unfitness suggesting that the change of the physical environment in addition to the changes to the infrastructure make retail agglomerations less attractive for their catchments. In addition to that, it is evident historically that the income of the consumers determines the resilience of the High Streets and Town Centres and as Martin (2012) pointed out the British regions that lagged in their recovery from recessions showed signs of slow adaptation to the emerging catchment trends. As a result of these issues places lose their functionality and therefore they become less attractive for the consumers. In the past challenges like this were met by the relocation of the retail activity, what was metaphorically described as the *waves of retail* (Fernie, 1998, Fernie, 1995, Schiller, 1986, Schiller, 1994), however nowadays the challenge is more complex and influenced by the opportunities and threats that are created by the rapid development of the technology and the omni-channel retailing (Grimsey et al., 2013).

Therefore, there is a call to reconsider HSs and reflect on how they can be changed and revitalised in order to reinvent themselves and provide to their catchment what they need in order to satisfy their needs in a way that will make themselves vital and viable. In the next section of this paper qualitative data that was collected for the HS2020 project will be analysed and discussed in relation to the reinvention process of the HSs.

The environmental factors that led to the reinvention of the High Streets

In the following section of the paper a brief discussion of the major impacts of the recent economic crisis to the UK High Streets and Town Centres will be offered. In order to provide this discussion in a comprehensive way the authors will use as an analytical framework the popular PEST framework (Johnson et al., 2013), namely the Political, Economic, Social, and Technological factors that influence the business environment.

Political factors

The UK government stressed that the high-streets and town centres face serious challenges from out-of-town retailers and the growth of online and mobile retailing (DCLG, 2015). As a response to the challenges the government organised measures to support high-streets with initiatives including the Portas Pilots and a big number of town teams that were put in place in order to provide localised support to failing towns. In December 2013, the then Communities Secretary Eric Pickles announced a £1Bn package to support high streets (GOV.UK, n.d.) where priority was given to make it easier for all the shops on Britain's high streets to grow, expand and take people on. A number of changes were introduced including (GOV.UK, n.d.):

- £1,000 off to the rates of retail businesses with premises of rateable value of less than £50,000 including shops, pubs, cafes, and restaurants.
- A moderate capping the Retail Price Index (RPI) increase in bills to 2% in 2014 to 2015 which was lower than the businesses expectation.
- Extending the doubling of the Small Business Rates Relief to April 2015.
- A reoccupation relief for 18 months with a 50% discount for new occupants of retail premises empty for a year or more.
- Cashflow help by allowing businesses to pay their bills over 12 months (rather than 10).

There were more areas where political intervention was decided that included parking arrangements, provision of local leadership, a review of the BIDs scheme, the support of local markets and finally review of the planning restrictions particularly aiming to allow landlords to make better and more efficient use of their empty properties.

Economic Factors

One of the most acute forces that drove the reinvention of the HSs is the shockwave of the recession and the various forms that it was manifested. With a disposable income that increased in a year to year basis every year since 2012 but with major fluctuation on the extend of the growth the consumer confidence remained relative stable from the beginning of the recession until 2014 when it started falling (see Table 1).

PLACE FIGURE 1 HERE

The evidence suggest that between 2008 and 2011 the *ghost towns*, a term attributed the New Economics Foundation (2002), re-emerged in the UK and empty shops increasingly appeared across the UK (Harris, 2011). This phenomenon had variable impact on different size places, with HSs seeing their vacancies being up more than two times above the national average. For example Camberley in Surrey saw a vacancy rate of 43% in 2009 (Cooper, 2009) while the Thanet town had a 36.1% of shops lying empty while Dartford had seen 26.3% of its shops closed down in 2011 (Stephens, 2011). These are extreme examples, and not representative of the whole UK but they show how severe this phenomenon was and how local communities were affected by the closure of retail shops that not only provide functional use but also are hubs for the socialisation of the local residents.

The decline of confidence that is recorded by OECD is also reflected on the footfall figures that are measured and reported by Springboard. In their report for 2016 (2017) they stress that the footfall in the retail high streets and town centres is down by almost 1% per year for the last two years. The data from the Office for National Statistics (2017) support this trend as they indicate a slow pace growth of the retail sales between 2013 to 2016 followed by a decline up until March 2017. At the same period of time though, internet sales have seen a significant increase, particularly the non-food sector that driven by the fashion retailers (ONS, 2017) saw an increase of up to 21.6% (Carroll, 2017).

Sociocultural factors

Wrigley and Lambiri (2015) have identified a number of different sociocultural changes that directly or indirectly have been influencing the High Streets and Town Centres. Issues related to the age of the population, the composition of the households, the ethnic origin and the credit consumption habits all have their own impact to the High Streets and Town Centres. Bookman (2008) for example examined the needs of the population that ages within the place and suggested that there needs to be provision that will allow them to stay active and integrated with their community. Another relevant issue regards the composition of the in the UK. Evidence from the ONS show the substantial increase of various ethnic groups with subsequent result to be the increase of ethnic shops in the the TCs and HSs that served these populations (Wrigley and Lambiri, 2015). BREXIT, on the other hand, will be a threat against this threat not only because it will put in jeopardy the residence status of a part of the non-British population but also because it was a major factor that negatively influenced the consumer confidence of the British and non-British population as consumers felt a complete sense of control over the post-BREXIT period (Wilmore, 2017). Having said that, the Institute of Grocery Distribution (IGD) (2017) stressed that the messages from BREXIT are still mixed but they

The other sociocultural issue that poses major challenges for the future of the High Streets and Town Centres is the emerging convenience culture that primarily affects the grocery retailing. IGD (2014) suggested that shoppers' expectation is now grocery retailers to organise their offering around their way of living providing them with products and services in the most convenient way. As Millington et al. (2015) pointed out convenience culture embraces not only the evolution of technology, that makes comparing, choosing and using easier and less resource heavy, but it also an issue that relates to the time-poor society that is on the move and it is more efficiently facilitated by the out-of-town one stop shop retail centres. An issue that relates to the convenience of the consumers and it is among the top challenges for High Street and Town Centre retailers is of course the scarcity and cost of parking (Parker et al., 2016; Wrigley and Lambiri, 2015).

Technological factors

The impact of online and mobile retail on High Streets and Town Centres is well researched in the recent literature. It is a phenomenon that is retailers and High Streets and Town Centres stakeholders often refer to, usually stating the threat it represents for the future of the traditional traders. Graham (2015) for example asserted that if high street stores do not adapt to online retailing they will die. Siegle (2017), a small independent HS retailer herself, pointed out that competing against the online and mobile retailers is tough for her business because she has to overcome the high business rates that significantly increase the costs of her business. At the same time, online and mobile retailers not only they are not hit by that but under the new business rates regime they will their costs to reduce (Siegle, 2017). Obviously, it is not only the isolated voices of retailers and stakeholders that highlight the impact of online and mobile retail commerce to the High Streets and Town Centres. As it is already mentioned the government committed £1Bn to the support of the High Streets and Town Centres and as it is stated in the foreground of the relevant policy paper that the government published (DCLG, 2015, p. online) the issue is that:

"Our high streets and town centres are facing serious challenges from out-of-town shopping centres and the growth of online and mobile retailing."

This issue becomes even more pressing for the traditional brick and mortar retailers because apparently British retailers provide an excellent customer experience via the mobile channel, better than the experience retailers from any other European country provide to their customers (Briggs, 2016). This trend is also supported by the data of Passport's report (2017) where it is clearly presented that the online and mobile channels are growing rapidly and there is a forecasted increase of 41% for the online sales until 2021 and 85% for the mobile sales for the same period of time. According to the same source (Passport, 2017) in-store retail sales will increase by the relatively mere 5% for the same period of time.

Reflecting on the brief PEST analysis above it is evident that there are multiple pressures challenging the position of the High Streets and the Town Centres in the UK. On the positive side the decline of the High Streets and the Town Centres is identified by the stakeholders and they work towards the solutions that will bring them back to their old days of glory. However a change process is inevitable to take place and the need for the reinvention of the High Streets and the Town Centres is as important as any time in their history.

Methodology

The purpose of the paper is to report a part of the results of the High Street UK 2020 project. The methodology adopted by the research team of the project is discussed in detail and published in this Special Issue in "Engaged Scholarship and the High Street: The case of HSUK2020" (Ntounis and Parker, forthcoming). Nevertheless, in order to help the reader to put findings into context a brief summary of the methodology will follow.

This project built upon a real problem experienced by ten pilot towns, namely Alsager, Altrincham, Ballymena, Barnsley, Bristol (Church Road, St George), Congleton, Holmfirth, Market Rasen, Morley, and Wrexham, and therefore the first methodological challenge was to engage the towns to the definition and development of the research aim. In order to achieve that the researchers employed a framework of *engaged scholarship* (Van De Ven and Johnson, 2006). They defined engaged scholarship as (Van De Ven and Johnson, 2006, p. 803):

"[…] a collaborative form of inquiry in which academics and practitioners leverage their different perspectives and competencies to coproduce knowledge about a complex problem or phenomenon that exists under conditions of uncertainty found in the world."

A set of aims and objectives were collaboratively devised that were related to the mid- and long-term change of the respective High Streets and Town Centres. The first step in order to achieve these aims and objectives was the project team to conduct a systematic literature review to examine what factors have previously been identified to influence the vitality and viability of the High Streets and Town Centres. This process returned 201 factors (Parker et al., 2016). In order to reduce this selection of factors to a more manageable and comprehensive proportion a Delphi Technique where 22 retail experts were employed was implemented. Delphi Technique is *a group process involving an interaction between the researcher and a group of identified experts on a specified topic, usually through a series of questionnaires* (Yousuf, 2007, p. 1). After two iterations of engagement of the experts the 201 factors were reduced down to 25[1] hierarchically order by their how much impact they have on the performance of the High Streets and Town Centres and how much influence local stakeholders had over them.

The final stage of the project focused on the development of a framework for managing the change of the HSs and identifying interventions that can facilitate the change. Four major intervention themes were identified, namely "repositioning", "reinventing", "rebranding", and "restructuring". This paper focuses on the reinvention of the High Streets.

How can the High-Streets be reinvented?

Understanding the need of reinvention

It was quite apparent from all the focus groups that took place that there were a diverse range of challenges that call for the reinvention of the High Streets and Town Centres. In some cases the need emerged because of the changing nature of the needs of the catchment. In the case of Ballymena, for example, the need that was identified was the development of an evening economy that would be facilitated by the better utilisation of the outside seating and the café culture. In Wrexham it was reported that the catchment that is not served are the teenagers that have no free activities to attend during the summer. Or, in the case of Barnsley, the challenge was to make the High Streets and Town Centres more attractive for the younger college students as at the moment it mainly attracts older people. In some other cases, as in the case of Market Rasen, the challenge was how to reposition the traditional market or in the case of Congleton it was the communication of the concept of well-being through the refurbishment of the leisure centre.

[1] See Ntounis and Parker (forthcoming) "Engaged Scholarship and the High Street: The case of HSUK2020" for details on the elicitation process.

The real challenge though is to understand that the reinvention is not a bespoken project or a one-off solution but it is a culture that needs to be embedded to the minds of the place managers and retailers. When it comes to retail competition it is simple to understand that the change is an outcome of diversification, which is a strategic choice that comes as a result of the constant monitoring of the internal and the external environment. In the case of the High Streets and Town Centres, even though performance indicators are used to measure their success or decline, the knowledge of the decision-makers is usually limited or incomplete. This has a result that the understanding of the need to make changes to the extent of the reinvention comes as a response, occasionally late, which highlights the need for a constant system of incoming information that will inform the decision-makers about the emerging challenges. A workshop participant in Bristol suggested that:

"I like the fact that there is a noticeable improvement and new shops are coming in, like delicatessens for example"

This sense of knowing for a fact that change is happening implies that there are places where stakeholders can notice and understand change, even though hard data to support may be absent. Understanding the catchment is a complex challenge anyway because consumer behaviour is not always rational or conscious. In Alsager for example, the opening of a mixed use shop that roofs an art shop, a health and wellbeing centre, and a counselling centre was identified as a good practice, or possibly the anchor that the catchment will recall from the High Streets and Town Centres.

Learning the art and the science of reinvention

The reinvention of the High Streets and Town Centres is the outcome of knowing what the High Streets and Town Centres can offer and what the catchment needs within the competitive environment these two cohabit. Some High Streets and Town Centres that were researched for the HS2020 project had a much clearer idea of what is the retail attraction that makes them stand out whilst some others were in the process of figuring that out. Altringham for example had a clear view that they aspired to be a modern market town that will be attractive not only for the catchment but also for new entrepreneurial activity mainly focussing on local products. Barnsley on the other hand has to deal the collapse of the 1249 regeneration partnership and the local council stepped in to push for the reinvention. The locomotive for the change is in both cases retail, in the first one it is organic and allowed to nurture within the marketplace of the HS whilst in the second is designed to work within the public realm. These cases signal a process of learning to reinvent the High Streets and Town Centres, either building on the capabilities of the local community (microenvironment) or on the opportunity that emerged in the wider socioeconomic environment (macroenvironment).

Learning also involves the engagement and co-operation of the stakeholders locally and regionally. This may emerge in the form of a flawless interaction or in the form of a conflict that will lead to a resolution that will inevitably involve some change. High Streets and Town Centres have a lot to learn from the retailers in terms of how to plan the reinvention. Retailers are changing the way they do business and become increasingly more reliant to their online sales while other retailers engage in partnerships that allows them to extend their offering and attract a wider and more diverse catchment (see for example Argos tie-up with eBay). Creating a click and collect High Streets and Town Centres was proposed by a number of pilot towns, for example from Holmfirth. Mixed uses of space was also proposed, or the introduction of events, the utilisation of public spaces such as the parks, or even the short-term lease of unused retail space and its use for the presentation of the work of the local artists.

No matter if the learning will be microenvironment or macroenvironment, or even both, driven it shall be designed in an organised way that will make sure that the learning will generate knowledge and subsequent value for the High Streets and Town Centres.

Intervening in the High Streets and Town Centres

The intervention in the High Streets and Town Centres is the most substantial part of the change that happens. The intervention happens in layers and can be subtle to the level of the encouragement of the creation of outside hospitality space as it happened to Ballymena up to the local or regional level of the development of a public scheme that will work on the complete revamp of the High Streets and Town Centres as it happens in Barnsley. The intervention takes into account the issues of the vitality and viability of the High Streets and Town Centres, particularly because it involves the investment of either public money or funds invested by retailers and the accountability of the decision-makers is a requirement.

In Market Rasen for example the change is a result of conflict. The attempt to create an attractive for the catchment offering does not necessarily leave all the stakeholders happy and that was vocally communicated in the workshops that took place there. In Ballymena on the other hand they advocate for a hand-to-hand partnership between the public and the private stakeholders. An interviewee from Ballymena suggested that:

“We have very good amenities, as you can even take a shower, good facilities in the town centre and you can relax when in the centre”

There is a clear indication of the sense of partnership and an approval of the joint delivery of a market place. Especially in smaller HSs the presence of a niche small independent retailer can be the catalyst for the success because it can offer the different that the catchment is looking for and cannot find in the national multiples.

The online experience is also an integral part of the intervention. Offering free WiFi for example as Ballymenta does makes the place a substantial part of the distribution channel that can facilitate the multichannel experience for the catchment. Offering connectivity is a tool on the hands of the HSs to compete against out-of-town shopping centres that usually offer this facility to their visitors. It is also a way to make sure that if an omnichannel platform will be created and put in place the catchment will have the opportunity to access it. For example, accessing a mobile app that will use and feed real-time data for the available car park spaces will address one of the most important challenges of the HSs.

What is the reinvention of the High-Streets after all?

It is a process of understanding the catchment, learning from the micro and macroenvironment and intervening in order to deliver a landscape that is attractive for the visitors and the users of the High Streets and Town Centres (see Figure 1).

PLACE FIGURE 2 HERE

All the models of retail change talk about a cycle of transformation that in a Darwinian manner select the fittest to survive within an evolving environment. The reinvention of the HS is not dissimilar to this premise. Portas (2011), in the foreword of her review, maintained that we cannot and we shall not attempt to save every HS. Justin King (2012, p.8), the ex-CEO of Sainsbury's, in a public speech suggested that:

"So, we all need to adapt or die, be foxes not hedgehogs. Something that successful grocers have been adept at."

Hughes and Jackson (2015) theorised that the death of the High Streets and Town Centres is the outcome of the combination of numerous factors that are either intrinsic or extrinsic to the High Streets and Town Centres. The findings of the HS2020 project suggest that the High Streets and Town Centres that will succeed shall pay attention and address a variety of factors that are within their ability to influence. In a nutshell it is about accessibility, comfort, interest, entertainment and safety. The catchment will choose to custom the High Streets and Town Centres that are closer to their needs.

Leahy (2011) points that the more the institutions tailor their offers to their customers the more promiscuous they make them because customers expect to receive a tailor made offering that will fit to their exact needs. Changing and reinventing the High Streets and Town Centres is exactly about that, it is a response to the promiscuous customer that searches for the optimal offering for their needs. High Streets and Town Centres shall be prepared to address this promiscuity by being flexible, by offering alternative uses, by providing comfort and safety, and by being an organic part of the community they belong to.

Practitioner implications

The reinvention is an art and a science. It requires a vision and a visionary team to lead the change process, but it also requires information on the trend changes, routines that will produce sufficient knowledge, and people to apply the knowledge and capitalise on that. Retail change theories refer to the b*ras de fer* between the old and the new, the established and innovative, and the importance of letting the fight to happen because through that change occurs. The reinvention of the High Streets and Town Centres is a fight like that. It is a fight between the traditional brick and mortar retail and the modern omnichanneling. It is a fight to interest the catchment and keep it in the High Streets and Town Centres rather than letting it escape to the out-of-town or the online choices. It is about developing a retail and a service mix, anchored around a focal place of interest, with easy access and a plethora of activities to keep the catchment purposefully engaged. Of course, in addition to that, it is an exercise of strong leadership that will involve the stakeholders and make them agents of the curation of the High Street.

It shall be acknowledged that the reinvention of the High Streets and Town Centres can only happen within the remit of the authority of the local decision-makers. It is a positive sign that various government initiatives have been introduced in order to support and underpin with information and knowledge the debate of ‘the vitality of town centres’ that is contained within the National Planning Policy Framework 2012. This project attempted to provide a forum for stakeholder engagement and knowledge exchange that is justified by the methodology that employed. With respect to the three stages of the reinvention (see Figure 2) the findings of this research reveal a number of practical implications worthy of future study. With regards to the understanding of the need for a change the evidence from the research indicate that the decision-makers need to develop their management and decision-making skills. Previous research has also pointed out that the decision makers come diverse backgrounds and they do not necessarily have the information, knowledge, skills or experience to scan and respond to the changes that happen in High Streets and Town Centres (Hogg et al., 2003, 2004; Morgan, 2008; Yanchula, 2008). It will be beneficial for all the stakeholders to actively engage with their peers and share knowledge and information for the common good. It will also be useful if the decision makers will be provided with the necessary development support (Theodoridis and Kayas, 2017) so that they will possess the skills to collect and analyse data, produce information and knowledge that will be underpin decisions and create value from the various sources of data that are in possession.

Addressing the emerging challenges also entails a process of learning and collaboration. The evidence from the research suggest that High Streets and Town Centres that engage retailers in the process of understanding the evolution succeed better results because the decision makers benefit from the knowledge and understanding of the retailers, even when the knowledge is moderated and partial. This finding relates to the ones of the work of Medway et al. (1999, 2000) who maintained that the retailers' involvement with the High Streets and Town Centres is not only vital but it necessitates their financial support for the achievement of vitality and viability of the place. The findings of the research are also in agreement with the findings of the research of Thomas and Bromley (2003) who highlighted the impact of the retail linkages for the revitalisation of retail agglomerations. Therefore, addressing the emerging challenges requires the engagement of the retailers because they can provide tacit and tangible resources for the sustainable development of the place.

Finally, the intervention process *per se,* requires an excellent understanding of the emerging challenges and the boundaries of intervention set by the policies. Furthermore, it also requires understanding of the marketing issues that particularly relate to the consumer behaviour and lifestyles that at some point became non-compatible with the High Streets or Town Centres and rendered them unattractive or obsolete. This was highlighted in the work of Page and Hardyman (1996) and Stubbs et al. (2002) but was particularly focussed on the beneficial synergies between Town Centre schemes and retailers in the work of Warnaby et al. (2005). Marketing the High Streets and Town Centres is a function that moves beyond operational activities such as litter management or the Christmas Lights. In fact, it is a complex strategic function that involves the understanding of the catchment and the delivery of a place that within it capabilities will provide value to all the engaged stakeholders and users.

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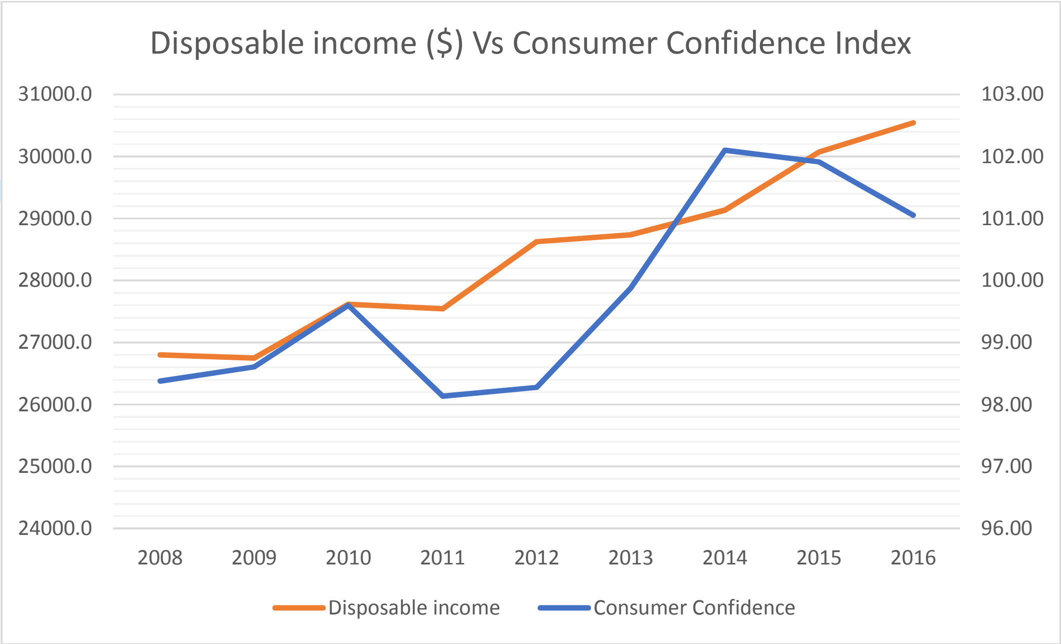

Figure 1:Disposable income Vs. consumer confidence in the UK, adapted from OECD (2017)

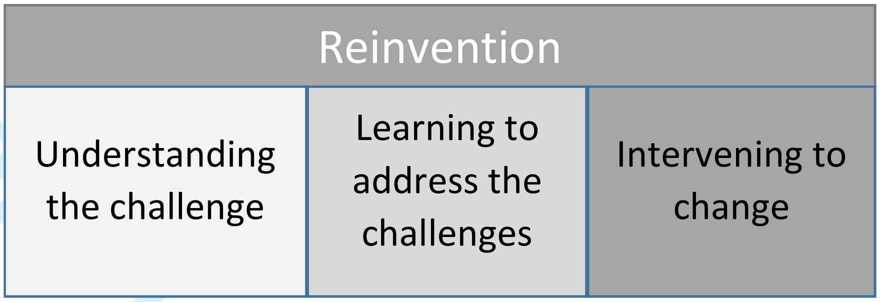

Figure 1: The reinvention process (Theodoridis et al., 2017)